

TOP PLACES TO WORK

# As these workers faced off with COVID-19, their employers had their backs

Free mental health counseling, safe places to sleep, extra time off. These are just some of the things top employers did to help.

By [Hiawatha Bray](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 19, 2020, 4:32 p.m.



The VA Boston Healthcare System set up separate units for COVID-19 patients practically overnight at its facilities in Brockton and West Roxbury. From left, nurses Samantha Hanrahan, Lauren Tetreault, and Melanie Arsenault in West Roxbury. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For many businesses, the greatest challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic has been keeping the lights on. Then there are those that must provide vital front-line services to people infected by the virus, as well as companies doing other kinds of essential work. For these employers, staying in business isn’t enough. They have to raise their game.

Vincent Ng, director of the VA Boston Healthcare System, realized how bad COVID could get in late February, when his hospitals sent doctors to New York to deal with the city’s massive outbreak. Here in the Boston area, the organization set up separate units in March for COVID patients: one for residents of the VA’s nursing home in Brockton, and another at its West Roxbury hospital for incoming acute-care patients. “Those were done actually overnight, maybe over a weekend,” Ng says.

To boost morale for patients and workers in Brockton, employees decorated the facility with images of the tropics and named it Cabo, after the popular Mexican resort town Cabo San Lucas. “It was sort of a privilege to be able to take care of veterans at that time, knowing that friends and family members were not able to visit loved ones,” says Rebecca Fournier, a licensed practical nurse who volunteered to staff the unit.

Also in March, about 40 percent of the health care system’s 4,500 employees began working from home, including doctors who kept tabs on patients via computers and phones. Ng made sure that all on-site personnel had ample

supplies of personal protective equipment. He also assigned extra staff members and provided frequent breaks to give workers wearing hot, uncomfortable protective gear a chance to rest and cool down. “Whatever we needed, we had at our fingertips,” says Amy Hanson, an assistant nurse manager at the Brockton facility, who was part of the staff assigned to Cabo (Cabo was closed once there were no more patients infected with the virus). “We always felt safe.”

Ng also let workers worried about infecting family members move into the Fisher House, a building at the West Roxbury campus that usually houses visiting families of VA patients. Staffers who worked with COVID patients even got a small bonus. “It’s not that much money for the risk that they face,” Ng says. “But it’s more important that we recognize them and they believe that they are valued.”

Meeting patient needs was the big push at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, which for half a century has been serving working-class residents of the city around the clock. Since the pandemic, that clock has been ticking a lot faster. The center’s chief executive, Manny Lopes, has been running on COVID time since he first learned of the threat in February. Most of the center’s 20 clinical and administrative buildings were closed down, and about 400 of its 1,400 workers were told to stay home. Another 120 were furloughed until August, while Lopes and other senior staff took pay cuts. There was little choice; with so many medical services shut down, the center was losing \$1 million a week in revenue during the early stages of the pandemic.

Two of the largest clinics remained open, with one devoted to pediatric care and the other to COVID cases. When the pediatrics staff realized that too few children were coming in to get routine vaccinations, they turned a van into a mobile treatment center that traveled to young patients' homes. In late March, the center opened one of the state’s first drive-through COVID testing centers, at the former Suffolk Downs racetrack. “We were running it seven days a week outside, in very tough conditions,” Lopes says.

But Lopes had no difficulty finding volunteers. Meanwhile, the center’s other medical services continued, mostly online. Computing support manager Bill Festa led a team of technicians who scrambled to set it all up. The pressure took its toll. “Things were very busy in the IT department, really overwhelming, to be quite honest, for me and my team,” Festa says. He appreciated the center’s behavioral health department, which began offering counseling to workers. “It was a great way to hit the reset button,” Festa says, “and it got me going again.”

The center also gave employees in lower-paying jobs access to a program that offers government-subsidized fruits and vegetables to community residents. Once again, it was an idea put forward by staff members and eagerly adopted by Lopes. “Probably 50 percent of our staff comes from the communities we serve,” he says. “Our staff is very connected to the mission, our core values, and the culture.”

Health care organizations were at the center of fighting the pandemic, but Virtual, which helps manage more than 100 trade associations and technology consortiums, found itself playing a vital role, too. That’s because the Wakefield company also performs licensing and certification services for government agencies.

As the disease filled Massachusetts hospital beds last spring, the Commonwealth needed all the nurses it could get, both from its own nursing schools and from other states. Every nurse must meet the standards of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and Virtual processes applications and ensures qualified applicants are approved as quickly as possible. As the need intensified, the company streamlined its systems, enabling it to expedite thousands of license applications. “That’s the difference between nurses being on the floor in this crisis or not,” says chief executive Andy Freed.

The company’s licensure team in Nashville put in overtime, bringing in additional workers to process 4,000 more applications for nurses in Massachusetts between March and August than it had in the same period the year before. “My team was inspired, excited to assist,” says Jennifer Williams, Virtual’s vice president of operations.

In the meantime, the company’s conference management business is relearning how to conduct meetings for clients based outside the United States. Pre-COVID, they would put a team of workers on a plane. Now it’s all done remotely.

The time shifts can be more daunting than jet lag. A 9 a.m. meeting in Japan kicks off at 7 p.m. the night before in Boston, while another conference in Europe may start at 3 a.m. Boston time.

To counter the crazy time shifts and the stress of COVID-related work, Freed has shortened meetings and given all employees a bonus half-day off one Friday a month. Employees with children are encouraged to mark out blocks of parenting time. New mom Miriam Macedo, a member of Virtual’s people and culture team, says Virtual’s management style helps her balance work and motherhood. “One of the great things that’s going to come out of this COVID is empathy,” she says.

For Fidelity Bank’s 160 employees in Massachusetts, protecting small business customers hammered by COVID-related shutdowns and other setbacks has been paramount. When the Trump administration released billions in emergency small business loans on a Friday afternoon in April, Fidelity’s commercial lending team worked around the clock and through the weekend to make sure their customers wouldn’t miss out. Even though some 85 percent of the Leominster-based bank’s staff are working from home, they processed about 75 applications over that weekend.

“There was no pressure from the bank telling us we had to,” small business relationship manager Rebecca Beaton says of the loan-processing frenzy. “In fact, they said, ‘Please don’t.’” But the lending team was afraid that if they waited, other borrowers would snap up all the cash. (Banks that didn’t start the process until Monday had clients who were denied funds, says Dee Sendrowski, the bank’s human resources director.) While Beaton worked, her husband served her meals in her home office while their two children, 10 and 12, sat on a nearby sofa, reading and keeping their mother company.

All told, Fidelity Bank processed 449 emergency loans totaling \$54.8 million — more than three-quarters of them valued at \$150,000 or less.

The bank rewarded employees with extra time off. “My boss told us to take more time, not just the additional two days that we worked,” Beaton says.

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